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Research Report Critique:

Moving on Up? What Groundbreaking Study Tells Us About Access, Success, and Mobility in Higher Ed



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The *Moving on Up? What Groundbreaking Study Tells Us About Access, Success, and Mobility in Higher Ed* report by Stephen Burd seeks to raise awareness of the data published in a paper, “Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility.” This paper was released at the same time that Donald Trump began his presidency, therefore, it may not have received as much attention as it could have, considering the findings. New America published a blog series highlighting the information from the Mobility Report Cards paper and versions of those posts have been reprinted in this report. The paper and this report gathered data from de-identified tax records from students, who attended college between the years 1999 and 2013, as well as from their parents. They also used the College Scorecard provided by the U.S. Department of Education, which supplied the information about the early adulthood earnings of the more than 30 million Americans for which data was gathered.

The report begins by highlighting that the Mobility Report Card data demonstrates that college access is still a problem despite increases in the number of students receiving

financial aid and the increasing number of low-income students pursuing degrees after high school. The report concludes that “access rates for low-income students have an inverse relationship with selectivity and prestige” (p. 9). This is applicable in both public and private institutions. Many low-income students are attending community colleges and for-profit institutions, which do not have as high mobility rates as the more selective and prestigious public and private institutions nor do they have the necessary resources to assist these students. Furthermore, a significant discovery that arose from this data is that low-income students are nearly as successful as their wealthier counterparts that graduate from the same institution. Therefore, this finding contradicts the popular assumption that low-income students should settle for colleges that are less selective and that they should be going to the best college they can. This is not to say that open enrollment colleges deserve less support from policymakers because they



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still have mobility rates that are on par with regional public universities. However, policymakers need to find ways to push the prestigious public and private institutions to enroll higher numbers of low-income students who deserve it while also supporting open enrollment admissions institutions.

In addition to analyzing the results of the Mobility Report Card data studies, the *Moving on Up? What a*

Groundbreaking Study Tells Us About Access, Success, and Mobility in Higher Ed report goes on to explain some of the many reasons behind the relative lack of lower-income students at more prestigious universities. It is a fact that the most selective institutions "take the students with the

strongest academic backgrounds" (p. 19). While low-income students are just as likely to succeed once enrolled at a prestigious and selective college or university, difficulty being accepted into one due to a lack of preparatory resources is a barrier many low-income students face. While more well-off students often have access to advanced college-prep resources during high school, such as advanced courses, ACT/SAT prep courses, opportunities for extracurricular involvement, and college application coaches, the report

explains that many low-income students do not have these advantages. In response to this inequality of resources, some selective institutions are moving toward ways to overcome these issues, through practices such as making applications test-score optional, as well as replacing some student loans with grant aid (p. 24). However, while the paper speaks to this issue, this is just one small piece of the puzzle of missing resources that acts

to keep low-income students from being accepted into more selective institutions. Proximity to home is another important factor that influences college choices for low-income students. A further analysis and explanation of the ways in which institutions can work to overcome these issues

would be very beneficial to students from less affluent backgrounds as well as ways to help students think about their options even if they are farther away.

A discouraging finding from the Mobility Report Card study was that many public institutions are enrolling fewer low-income students than they used to in the late 1990s. Not only are they enrolling fewer low-income students, but these institutions are enrolling more high-income students. Not all selective



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public institutions are following this trend (i.e. Georgia State University) but the majority of them are becoming less accessible. This trend is also affecting the institutions that are not as selective and prestigious, which have a history of being more accessible to low-income students. This data is alarming because it means that the pathways that existed before and were possibly responsible for that increase in college access, in terms of a higher number of low-income students pursuing degrees after high school, may be going away. The report insists that policymakers must examine "the cult of enrollment management," which is pushing institutions to target wealthier students who can pay more out of pocket and limiting access to higher education.

The Mobility Report Card data gives researchers more to work with because it provides a more complete picture of college attendance and how that is influenced by students' family income. For example, in previous investigations of the impact of economic background on college attendance, researchers used the number of students who received the Pell Grant as a rough equivalent of low-income status. However, eligibility for the Pell Grant is dependent on more than family income which means that not all Pell Grant recipients come from the lowest-income families. The Mobility Report Card data eliminates this problem by examining the tax records and yielding data that is more


accurate. Additionally, it is important to note that many students who may be just out of range of Pell Grant eligibility may not actually have the financial support that their family's tax and income information suggests. Many students who are ineligible to receive the Pell Grant do not receive financial support from their families, thus by denying them federal financial aid, these students may not have the ability to afford higher education, much less higher education at a selective and prestigious institution. Due to this issue, it can be very hard to get an accurate account of exactly what constitutes a "low-income" student.

Data in the report also provides a look into the other side of the spectrum, the students who come from families at the top of the income scale. This is data that was not formerly available since colleges only have to report the family income data of students receiving financial aid. This type of data is useful because it can be very revealing. For example, the report examines the College of William & Mary, which is a top public research university. However, after reviewing the incomes of the students that attend, it is shown that an overwhelming number of students come from families in the top ten percent of the income scale. Therefore, the report urges that policymakers must increase the transparency in higher education data so students, researchers, and policymakers can have more accurate data when making decisions.

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It is important to mention that the *Moving on Up? What a Groundbreaking Study Tells Us About Access, Success, and Mobility in Higher Ed* report also acknowledges the limitations of the Mobility Report Card data throughout the different sections. Due to the nature of the way the data was collected, researchers limited the data to traditional college students who attended college between the years 1999 and 2013. Yet there is a growing number of nontraditional college students so this data does not offer much insight into the mobility rates of this population. The data also does not include the program of study, which could be a factor that has influence on some of the findings because there is a variety or a lack of variety of programs depending on the type of institution sometimes. Without some context, the Mobility Report Card data seems to show for-profit colleges as a viable path that may even be better than the average public community college. However, a majority of the students at those types of institutions are nontraditional college students and for-profit colleges tend to charge more and have more students with large amounts of student debt when compared to traditional and community colleges. In fact, when the researchers ranked institutions based on the net price, student loan repayment rates, and mobility indicators, the bottom fifteen schools were all for-profit colleges and vocational schools.

Overall, the *Moving on Up? What a Groundbreaking Study Tells Us About Access, Success, and Mobility in Higher Ed* report provides a thorough explanation and interpretation of the important and relevant data found in the Mobility Report Card paper. In the future, additional reports could build off of this information by seeking to more thoroughly analyze the ways in which highly selective institutions could work to level the playing field on which students from all backgrounds can access success. Additionally, future reports could look more closely at ways in which less selective institutions can adopt practices that work to increase their mobility rates. Furthermore, while there is an increase in the accuracy of the data provided by the Mobility Report Cards, the data focuses heavily on traditional college students. Researchers must also examine the access, success, and mobility rates of nontraditional students, as this is a growing population attending colleges. Overall, this report highlights the significant issue that, though talent may be equally distributed between students of all socio-economic backgrounds, opportunity and resources are not. The *Moving on Up? What a Groundbreaking Study Tells Us About Access, Success, and Mobility in Higher Ed* report is an important first step in bringing to light the important issue of disparity of access between high and low-income students in the world of higher education today in the United States. 

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References

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